Chapter II

Chapareke Hidrocálido – instrument and cosmogony invention

An exercise of historical construction as re-appropriation of the history has functioned as the basis of the Guggenheim Aguascalientes project, an artwork by the Mexican artist Rolando López[11] that holds the collaborative project Chapareke Hidrocálido, which has had a significant link to the notion of composition as a social system.

Before serendipity. A brief description of the departing point

Onorúame gave the Rarámuris the task of taking care of world balances. The Chapareke is part of these tools to keep that harmony.
Guadalupe Estrada Cancio
Chapareke, la llave de la casa de Dios
(2014)

Chapareke or Chapahuela in Rarámuri means: "The key of God's house".

Chapareke could be materially seen as a musical instrument mostly used by the indigenous of the north region of México, the Rarámuri or Tarahumara peoples. Its organological description it is still not quite stable. On the few writings about it, its definition varies from "musical arc" to "mouth arc"[12], for instance a published glossary of instruments defines it briefly as a sitar[13].

[11] As my relation with this artwork-museum is close but as an external collaborator, I will limit this thesis to the Chapareke project, more information about Guggenheim Aguascalientes can be found here: https://www.wondereur.com/artists/rolando-lopez/artworks/museum-guggenheim-in-aguascalientes-general-plane
[12] Civallero, Edgardo, *Arcos musicales de América del Sur*, 2014. at: https://www.academia.edu/10414073/Arcos_musicales_de_América_del_Sur
[13] Rozemblum, Jorge. *Glosario de instrumentos musicales*. Ed Akal, Spain, 2011, p. 127.

The Chapareke is a hollow rod or a stick, made out from *quiote* wood, the stem of the flower's maguey (*Agave fourcroydes*). Three metal strings are usually attached from one extreme to another extreme with small sticks as tuning pegs.

Its origins and age are equally obscure. Although a variety of musical arcs can be found mostly from the north of México through Latin America, it is played in a manner related to a Jew's Arp or African *Ngongo*.

Traditional sound production technique could be divided in two simultaneous actions. The first consists of plucking the strings with the right hand index finger while the left holds it in a horizontal position at the level of the face, pointing to left side of the interpreter. The second action occurs inside the mouth. It acts as a resonance cavity, filtering the harmonic spectrum while moving the tongue and the oral muscles for changing the size of the inner acoustic space.

Besides the specific technique, its stability resides too on the fact that Chapareke has its own rich cosmology. It is inserted in an ancestral system of metaphysical beliefs and culture practices, which determine it both as a divine gift and as a power tool to keep the balance of the universe.

It is also inscribed in a particular crisis environment, not only because of the systematic marginalization of the indigenous people in México but also because of the almost inexistent interest in Chapareke inside their communities[14]. This is a particularly striking element in relation with its cosmogony, Onorúame is sad because nobody plays Chapahuela and this is the reason the world for Rarámuris is filled with plenty of difficulties.

[14] After the documentary Chapareke: *La llave de la casa de dios* by Ángel Estrada, the Rarámuri culture was promoted by the state, but as it was not unexpected, these efforts ended with the electoral weather. The resource is not available online but as the Guggenheim Aguascalientes we screened it in the Punto Ciego Festival and you can ask the author for it to see it. Teaser: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_2Jb_vPbUg

The Chapareke exists in a kind of cultural crack or fissure out of which art can be made.

The purpose of this collaborative work is not to trace the Chapareke's anatomy, sound or manner of performance around the world to find a complete or perhaps endless genealogy. Nor is it to begin an ethnographic exercise that could reify the Chapareke granting its value only within the academy. Nor is it an attempt to locate its birth in time outside its own mystical context.

Instead, one of the purposes, in an ethnological thinking, is to find historic, geographic and mythological traces that could lead us to a build our own relation to the Rarámuris Chapareke through a complex art practice we call Chapareke Hidrocálido. Therefore, through this problematizing, to answer (in an artistic intervention of an ethnomusicology) some of the questions arisen from the two Chapareke situations, in a way that enables an empowering culture appropriation and a proactive sociopolitical criticism exercise through the sharing of cosmologies and through the construction of art processes (as it is explained later).

Serendipity

In September 2014 my colleague, Rolando López, found by mistake a description that became the trigger for a new collaborative work. As part of a bigger project called: Guggenheim Aguascalientes he was looking for the way people used to talk in Aguascalientes about 100 years ago and on a short narrative story by the writer Jesús Fructuoso López, he read an intriguing musical instrument description:

> One of those peasant brought with them a stick, with a string through each ends; plucked with the right thumb and situated on the mouth, he can made it vibrate, producing cadenced sounds with were modulate with the lips breathe;

> the left hand fingers played the string to cushion or produce different tones.[15]

The differences made by the author in relation with the sonority of European classic musical tradition, the description's poetic ambiguity and the way he explained it's belonging to the nature soundscape, were more than an incentive to start a quest in the construction of this unknown instrument.

> [...]easy to make, pitch limited […]. In a hall where the piano plays Bellini compositions, or Schubert's melodies, very few sonority could be produced by this one stringed instrument; but in the countryside, […]his accents become melodic ; as the nature tones, […]solitude has its own sound voice, […]which hurts the feelings and produces the inspiration.[16]

For us it was as much as an exercise of naïve conformation of an ancestral sound as a conscious act to reconstruct the past in an artistic exercise of criticism, since the narrative was the same in which this big metal foundry, Gran Fundición Central Mexicana, was recently working in Aguascalientes city, founded by Solomon Guggenheim; a foundry which left a lot of toxic waste polluting the city since then, in several ways –usually the government uses this toxic waste as material for the construction of roads.

At the beginning we made a lot of prototypes without achieving any successful results, until we came across a YouTube video[17]: Chapareke: La llave de la casa de Dios (Chapareke:

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[15] López, Fructuoso, *Un paseo campestre,* chapter III, on Giacinti, Alicia. Jesús F. López: *Un escritor Olvidado* – Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2011, México. At: http://guggenheimaguascalientes.com/unpaseocampestre.php

[16] *Op. Cit.* López, Fructuoso

[17] *Op. Cit*. Estrada, Ángel. Video.

The key of God's house) by Ángel Estrada in which the Rarámuri Antonio Camarillo Bautista appeared playing the Chapareke.

This opened a variety of paths to follow but some strategies slowly fell into place, we knew now how to make a functional Chapareke so we started to become aware of materials around us and opened our eyes for possibilities.

To have this attitude took us to recognize a potential situation to make a Chapareke: an extension of an avenue was being built in the city. Under the slogan "progress for all" the government was cutting many old trees with no promise of planting new ones (as we had seen according to its past actions and as we testified after). Furthermore, these avenues are built from the same toxic waste left by Solomon Guggenheim's foundry.
One of the fallen trees was displaying all its very enormous roots. We went there to cut one of the roots and we made a Chapareke.

Of course this took some time to figure out the right construction for each part, then finding the right strings and the adequate material for the tuning pegs, with only the video as a reference, it was a YouTube-based archeological reconstruction, but this strategy would allow us to conform a specific shape of the instrument, along with writing its own history and building a bridge between mythologies of both Chaparekes.

The heart

A particular identity constructed through art, was taking shape as Chapareke Hidrocálido. In other words, our environment gave us a social context where the instrument could be gestated with all the art's capacity to build meaning. In a clearly potential condition that positioned the

Chapareke in a decisive realm for us, our Chapareke was working from the inner earth to the air and eventually disappearing towards the sky (god's house), by means of sound. In the same way it was made from a root, from a dead tree cut because of the progress of modernity, and this is not just an artistic reading. Our damaged environment gave us a physical and social context where the instrument could gestate, imbued with all of art's capacity to make meaning. Made from a root from a dead tree cut to make 'progress' out of pollution, our Chapareke was working from the inner earth to the air and eventually disappearing to the sky (god's house) by means of sound.

Given the facts, we decided to take the responsibility to see the Chapareke Hidrocálido as a given key to us for articulating a paradigm where a power object built from recognizing its insertion in social reality, could serve as a point of resistance. Rereading the Rarámuri's myth, Chapareke Hidrocálido resulted in a specific version of the Rarámuri's Chapareke, with a dialogue between the different understandings of balancing the energies of the world.

We really are looking forward to apply the notion of the "God's house key" in a constructive approach. I.e. the Chapareke Hidrocálido is a tool for being able to write another history, another culture linked with the use of sound as an empowering act.

First approaches

Once the instrument was done we started to work with it. In the first piece we worked, the Chapareke Hidrocálido was inserted in a very forced way[18], although the historic relations were there, the instrument was not triggering directly what we found in it. I was just an accompanying music. Anyway it was a fruitful situation we had to solve later.

[18] https://vimeo.com/107000844

But what it was helpful at the time was the necessity to solve another more technical problems about the instrument. As the event was in an open space we had to think about amplification. We were interested in the filtering action of the mouth but amplifying this always ended up with the inherent amplification of the plucked strings. The nature of the Chapareke helped us to see the situation as an inseparable part of the instrument. At the end we attached a b-5 Behringer condenser microphone with a lot of danger to produce feedback.

Another job was deciding whether to specify sound production techniques or not, and if so, how would this be notated? It was a very engaging activity for me, and the exercise seemed to be going in a different direction from the close relation we had decided about the Chapareke Hidrocálido with its social context. So that was another problematic path to take. Although I had written some sketches for that piece[19], a more complex solution was about to come.

Growing branch

I started bringing the instrument into what I believed was a free-context environment, to be able to think just in the sound. In other words, I approached the instrument simply as a sounding object freed of any social context or physical environment. I developed lots of what we can name "extended techniques", preparing the instrument and activating its body with different materials and tools, a bow or a long screw for instance. Taking the instrument to a place where I could start from scratch and to see it as an object, as a sounding device, allowed other elements arose naturally. In this case the use of the voice appeared as an organic component of the

[19] *Op. Cit.* Vimeo Link

performance. The investigation became a new independent piece, still linked to a body of work[20]. The work has had numerous outputs since then.

The music I wrote concerned recognizing the two important sound processes that were occurring at playing the device, the mouth and on the other hand, the strings. Then to become fully aware of the different ways these actions could be produced, altered, expanded, and changed over time. So I decided to write in three staffs. Indicating more the gesture than the produced sound. One to the actions that happen on the strings, and the other two for a divided behavior of mouth: the proximity from mouth toward the instrument and the size of the oral cavity. Dividing the interpreter actions allows to think on independent parameters and to combine them to obtain another result. Of course one more staff is also added when the voice is needed. As time is written traditionally in the horizontal axis, precise rhythm notations could be achieved on each parameter[21].

However, instead of walking far from the the instrument, the instrument's identity was also growing. The composition of this contemporary music work was an act of awareness about the present capacities of the Chapareke Hidrocálido as an instrument for contemporary music, with all the historic dialogue that this may have. Again the social context was being part of the culture construction from the instrument, that is to say seeing the Chapareke as a piece not isolated from its cultural complexities.

[20] https://soundcloud.com/omar-fraire/sinergia-serendipia
[21] http://www.guggenheimaguascalientes.com/chaparekehidrocalido_2_esto.php

Another Relations

In the meantime, we were also concerned to meet the author of the documentary *Chapareke: La llave de la casa de Dios*, to know more about *Rarámuri*'s culture. It was not difficult to find him; we came across a common friend in an exhibition about *Guggenheim Aguascalientes* where *Chapareke Hidrocálido* was an important element of it. So we contacted him to present his documentary in a festival I was organizing as a curator, in which one of the works was a new performance piece for *Chapareke Hidrocálido*, a piece where other elements start to appear, and a piece that took us to yet another level and relation with this work.

Ritual

In the frame of the *Punto Ciego* festival, we were preparing a different piece with the instrument. In this case we did it with more people involved. Working with the *Chapareke Hidrocálido* had showed us another inherent aspect of it, the latent displacement of boundaries, or even the blurring of them.

Soon we noticed of the gesture and movement embedded in the playing technique, and we came up with the idea of incorporated movement in the performance. In the same way, soil was always present in the back of our minds, and of course in the fabrication of the instrument. So that Rolando had some soil on a table to work with these relations. We played the instruments on it and we saw how the table was naturally amplifying the sound and also how the instrument left its trace on it, as we were moving while playing.

Something was being presenting before our perception: the presence and influence of the human body. One of our co-workers in the festival and in the *Guggenheim Aguascalientes*

Museum, Pilar Ramos, assumed this element as a part of a multiplicity that could be developed in a sort of unfolded space from this phenomenon.

The output was intriguing. The performance ended up as a ritual where three of us were playing the instrument over the table full of soil and a naked body was moving over rocks of toxic waste[22], leaving traces in her skin[23]. The interactions were multiple. Not only at the artistic level but also in the realm of the *Rarámuris* cosmology. After two rehearsals and one presentation we felt touched in an indescribable manner. We like to think this as an energetic situation in which a link with the indigenous heritage acts as a spiritual fact.

Pilar after explained the event beautifully: "Who knows what threads are we pulling"[24].

Illustration 1. Pilar Ramos, Omar Fraire and Jodie Buffalo experimenting with Chapareke and choreography.

[22] This rocks are part of the legacy of Mr. Guggenheim, and belong to the Guggenheim Aguascalientes collection: http://guggenheimaguascalientes.com/coleccion.php
[23] *Op. Cit.*
[24] http://guggenheimaguascalientes.com/chaparekehidrocalido_2_proceso.php

Chapareke Hidrocálido the short documentary

This project became one of the interests for a film young student in Aguascalientes, Víctor Góngora who came to me with the initial aim to make a documentary about sound art in Aguascalientes, basically he wanted to speak about *Punto Ciego,* a festival I was developing since about three years. For the sake of help him to find his own definition of sound art, we invited him to one of the rehearsal of the recent *Chapareke Hidrocálido* project.

At the end he got interested in making a *Chapareke Hidrocálido*'s[25] documentary, which has been projected as a part of the student's work in the University's film department.

Una Raíz Para Dos Cielos - The Last Documentary

Recently we have realized a longer documentary about the original Chapareke, the Rarámuri Chapareke. I had the opportunity to go to the Copper Canyon in Chihuahua México, to research about it. This was possible thanks to the summer research stipend provided by Wesleyan University.

The results of this research have delimited the Chapareke Hidrocálido very clearly. Our approach is completely an artwork in which we create our small community and history about it, it is linked to Guggenheim Aguascalientes rather subtle, as the only link between them is Fructuoso López, the journalist who wrote about this sort of picnic trail where he listens for the first time an instrument that we assumed as the Chapareke. The same journalist who wrote against the conditions the workers had in the Guggenheim foundry. To admit Chapareke could be born in Aguascalientes, obeys more to a politic act of cultural appropriation in favor to the Guggenheim Aguascalientes Museum, than to a careful ethnomusicological premise to research about.

[25] https://youtu.be/G6cwEYXRqVA

Rarámuri culture is very marginalized nowadays, in part this decision has been taken voluntarily by the Rarámuris themselves, but the reasons are originated in the extreme poverty and the lack of strategies from the institutions to include them and save their culture. In addition, the regrettable presence of the drug trafficking, the "narcos" and their inherent entanglement with the government's corruption, make their situation impossible for cultural development, not to mention the situation is not good enough for young people to try to learn how to play Chapareke.

We found Antonio Camilo, the oldest of the Chapareke players, but we didn't find Guadalupe Estrada, people said he became an alcoholic after his wife died, they say he didn't even play Chapareke anymore. Although we found a priest in Cusárare, one of the populations in the canyon, who played Chapareke rarely.

Those conditions deserve attention when the time comes to consider Chapareke as an instrument from other region different from the Rarámuri one. Even the Chapareke Hidrocálido project should be reconsidered entirely, as a fraternal branch, born for very different reasons and with very different purposes. For the next stage of the project we must talk about what can we do for the Rarámuri Chapareke and how our Chapareke is or could, affect it.

The research I did in the Rarámuri region enlightened me about those issues. Although the documentary we realized has very problematic use of language towards the Rarámuri culture, is a work in progress[26], and after I presented it for my last concert I have been working on how to elaborate a better edition. My friend, the multidisciplinary artist Xésar Tena, was in charge of the film.

[26] The work in progress can be watched here, with English subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q77dLyZogc0&t=388s